Antoinette J. Lee, Audrey L. Brown, and Art Gómez

Diversity and Cultural Resource Careers

Since World War II, the National Park Service has been a pioneer in the preservation of the nation's diverse cultural heritage. At a time when few historical organizations and agencies addressed this dimension in the nation's history, the National Park Service preserved and interpreted historic places associated with American Indians, George Washington Carver, and Booker T. Washington. Now, half a century later, the bureau administers many more historic properties associated with African Americans, Asian Americans, Latino Americans, and Native Americans. Outside of the national park system, the National Park Service also assists with the preservation and interpretation of thousands of historic properties that reflect the experience of the nation's diverse cultural groups.

Despite these achievements, the National Park Service and its partnership organizations face tremendous challenges in ensuring that the parks and programs meet the needs of an increasingly multicultural nation. Few minority professionals work as historians, architectural historians, archeologists, ethnographers, and curators in the National Park Service or with other government agencies and private organizations that are devoted to historic preservation and cultural resources stewardship. How can the cultural resources professions attract and retain more diverse professional practitioners and decision-makers?

The George Washington Carver National Monument in Missouri was the first unit of the national park system to commemorate African American history. Photo courtesy NPS.

Lee's Remarks

In 1991, I participated in the National Preservation Conference in San Francisco where more than 2,000 participants celebrated the quarter century since passage of the National Historic Preservation Act of 1966 and looked to the future of the field. I presented a talk that focused on examples of diverse historic places throughout the nation and predicted that cultural diversity would be one of the major challenges of the future. Although the prediction was reinforced by other presentations at the conference, there was no immediate response from the field.

However, in late 1998, I was asked to develop the Cultural Resources Diversity Initiative at the National Park Service. This initiative is devoted to three major goals: to develop diverse professionals for the historic preservation/cultural resources field; to expand our partnerships with diverse communities and minority colleges and universities; and to advance the identification, evaluation, preservation, treatment, and interpretation of cultural resources associated with the nation's diverse communities.

Our activities include administration of the Cultural Resources Diversity Internship Program. In its first year, 1999, the Diversity Internship Program sponsored three diverse interns. In summer 2000, 12 interns were placed in NPS offices, national park units, state historic preservation offices, and the U.S. Forest Service. This year, 20 interns worked on a similar range of historic preservation projects. Through this program, our interns are exposed to professional work in this field. Many of them come away from the experience with an appreciation for cultural resources work and their possible role in it.

The conference, Places of Cultural Memory: African Reflections on the American Landscape, that took place May 9-12, 2001, in

Atlanta, Georgia, is another major effort of the initiative. This scholarly conference connected scholars of African and African-American studies with preservation professionals and brought about a better understanding of the cultural heritage of Africa that is evident in the American landscape.

The Cultural Resources Diversity Initiative is undertaking joint projects with minority organizations and minority colleges and universities. One of these is a training program on the Underground Railroad in the NPS Mid-Atlantic region with Delaware State University. Delaware State is the first historically black university to offer a full master's program in historic preservation. Other training activities are being carried out with the National Conference of Black Mayors, Goucher College, Coppin State University, Morgan State University, and the African American Heritage Preservation Foundation.

As the Cultural Resources Diversity Initiative evolves, we have cooperated with many of our colleagues in the National Park Service and our partnership organizations who are working toward the same goals. We hope that we can continue work together to bring about a cultural resources field of the 21st century that looks like America.

Brown's Remarks

The mission of the National Park Service is to preserve unimpaired the natural and cultural resources and values of the national park system for the enjoyment, education, and inspiration of this and future generations. The bureau cooperates with partners to extend the benefits of natural and cultural resource conservation and outdoor recreation throughout this country and the world. Maintaining a diverse workforce has a high priority among the principles to which the National Park Service adheres in order to actualize its mission.

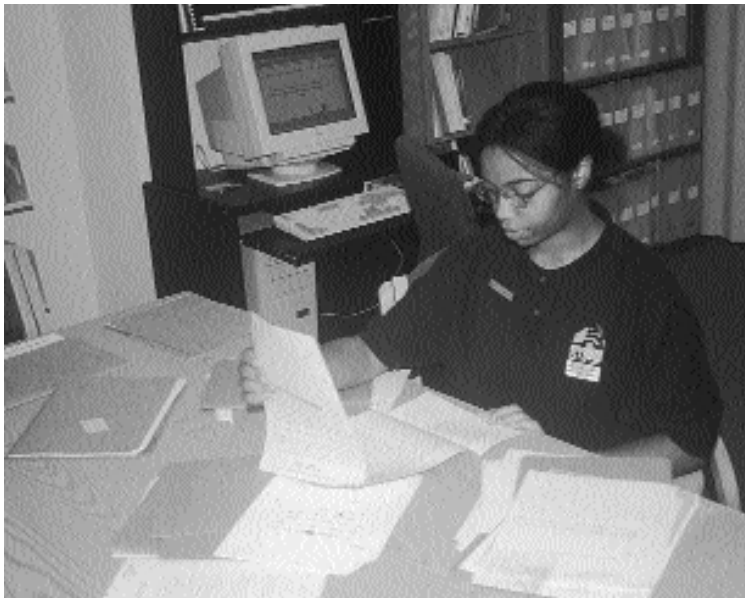
Through preservation legislation, Congress requires that the historical and cultural foundations of the nation be preserved as living parts of our community life and development in order to give a sense of orientation to the American people. The federal government is directed to use measures to foster conditions under which our modern society and our prehistoric and historic resources can exist in productive harmony and fulfill the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations. The 21st-century challenge is to recognize those peoples who comprise the present and future generations of American society and to develop the conditions under which harmony can exist between the past and the present.

The U.S. Census projections of the changing face of America suggest that in 30 years, 40% of the population will be people of color. Only a small percentage of these people will have traditional associations with national parks. But all of them will have culturally-derived heritage perspectives that are of significance to the National Park Service as it carries out its mandates.

Areas around many of our parks are experiencing rapid ethnic diversification. Many new immigrants of color will become park neighbors, park visitors, and part of the park workforce. In addition, among those people of color who have been part of the American tapestry, there are still many stories of their contributions waiting to be told. In order for the National Park Service to provide cultural heritage services, these perspectives must be identified, documented, and knowledge of them disseminated to park personnel and the general public.

One of the central issues that the National Park Service and other parts of the preservation community must address is the question of why career fields in historic preservation have remained non-diverse for many decades? I came to the National Park Service after a 31-year career in another discipline. In fact, when I came into the bureau, my experience with national parks was limited to Independence Hall field trips when I was a youngster. I believe this allows me to look at the system somewhat objectively and to see things that for some people are perhaps obscured by the "mystifications" of allegiance and loyalties honed over many years.

I see the field as very inbred and made up of families, friends, and members of nature conservation or historic preservation organizations. Often people come into the NPS workforce as volunteers or seasonal employees, appointed at a low grade, and in many cases, located in remote sites away from the urban environment. This system of recruitment and identifying potential employees in parks makes it unlikely that people of color will want to enter the workforce. Low-income people of color often cannot afford to be volunteers. Urban dwellers are unlikely to see a short-term job in a wilderness area as an opportunity.



The Cultural Resources Diversity Internship Program provides career exploration opportunities for diverse interns in historic preservation/cultural resources work. This intern cataloged park collections at the Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site. Photo courtesy Martin Luther King, Jr. National Historic Site, National Park Service.

Appearance is everything in our present image-oriented society. The public vision of the rugged white male park ranger is only a little less ubiquitous than Smokey the Bear. Moving beyond image to harsh realities, the National Park Service workforce continues to be predominately white males. According to a report of the Office of Economic Opportunity in the Department of the Interior, in comparison with other federal agencies, the National Park Service falls well below the median for employment in each of the categories in the general population.

What will it take to transform the field so that the professional ranks will look like America? I say "education, education, and education." I lean toward education because of my African-American cultural bias toward the notion that religious, educational, and social institutions are the foundations for social change.

Education about other cultures helps National Park Service staff members to become more culturally sensitive, enabling them to create a climate in which a culturally diverse workforce can flourish. Education is a vehicle that the National Park Service uses and should continue to use effectively to raise the awareness of people of color about career fields in cultural resource management and preservation. Indeed, as it strives to recruit and retain a workforce that reflects the diversity of the nation, the National Park Service advances a number of special initiatives in support of these goals.

There is still room for more innovative recruitment strategies and educational and training projects to help us meet tomorrow's public with a workforce that reflects the diversity of America. These will foster conditions under which our modern society and our prehistoric and historic resources can exist in productive harmony, thus fulfilling the social, economic, and other requirements of present and future generations of our culturally diverse nation.

Gómez's Remarks

With my entry into the National Park Service some 18 years ago, I, like so many other new arrivals to the Service, became enamored with the bureau mantra: "The National Park Service is a family." Although never fully appreciative of the origin of that concept, I took pride in the realization that I, a recent graduate with training in history, had become a professional, and as such, a contributor to the larger preservation community.

Just when and how the agency adopted this philosophy is difficult to determine. Perhaps the idea was fundamental to the establishment of the bureau in 1916. Perhaps the overall compactness of the Service lent itself to the notion of family, in contrast to the seemingly unwieldy organization of its federal counterparts.

A more plausible explanation had to do with the overwhelmingly rural inclination of the Service in its formative years. The Service's earliest park units were vast, sparsely populated expanses of western territory set aside for conservation purposes. The remoteness of Yellowstone, Yosemite, Grand Canyon, and Big Bend National Parks were not unlike the isolated military installations that punctuated the American western frontier during the 19th century. Personal dependency upon community or, more precisely, the military family within these secluded outposts was crucial to the physical and emotional well-being of their occupants.

As we all know, the Service's earliest parks emulated the military model. Try to image administering care to a seriously afflicted or injured park ranger in those days without the support of the parks as family model. Consider the loneliness and isolation in these remote localities without social interaction with or community participation from the park community. It is within this context—the park experience—that the philosophy of family took root and evolved into the revered tradition we readily adopt today.

Tradition has its place in any organization. It can be a positive force that shapes the identity

and defines the purpose of an institution. Viewed negatively, however, tradition can erode to become superfluous or inapplicable to existing conditions; therefore, it can even become a hindrance to organization growth. Likewise, a family, when perceived in a positive light, evokes images of cooperation, strength, and inclusion. On the other hand, a family may appear, especially to outside observers, as competitive, indecisive, and even elitist.

How the National Park Service chooses to define its family in the 21st century is an important framework in which to engage the topic of diversity and cultural resources careers. Since 1994, NPS has undergone strenuous reorganization. Yet, it has been too slow in improving its image among the nation's ethnic constituency. Agency procrastination lies in part in the obsolescence of the concept of the National Park Service family as traditionally perceived.

Our current national park system can no longer be characterized as predominantly rural. The American West still contains vast expanses of uninhabited, federally managed lands. However, more than 80% of westerners reside in cities and towns and not on ranches and farms. Since the 1960s, the clear majority of new additions to the system have been established in or near metropolitan areas. The national park system has become more urban in character.

If the National Park Service hopes to become more reflective of the diverse communities it represents, the iconoclastic park ranger on horseback must acquiesce to the urban park ranger, who is more reliant upon cellular phones and computer networking to reduce distance and time. In recent years, interpretive themes within our parks have been revised to accommodate the demands of increasingly ethnic and foreign visitations. The system's newest units, such as Palo Alto Battlefield, venerate the combatants on both sides. Andersonville, Washita, Manzanar, and most recently Sand Creek underscore the often tragic realities of cultural convergence.

In face of these challenges, NPS must abandon its traditional definition of "family" in favor of a non-traditional construct that will enable the bureau to keep pace with the social and political realities of the 21st century. Today's national parks are no longer islands unto themselves. The combination of computer technology, fiber optic telecommunications, and demographic change has minimized the isolation that park employees may have had in an earlier era.

NPS has little choice but to promote a new image of the "extended family," a more inclusive organization that welcomes African Americans, Hispanics, Asian Americans, Pacific Islanders, American Indians, and Alaskan Natives—both male and female—into the work force. It is within this context of extended family that we will evolve a National Park Service that is worthy of the nation's best ideals.

Antoinette J. Lee is special projects manager, National Center for Cultural Resources, National Park Service, Washington, DC.

Audrey L. Brown is an ethnographer with the Archeology and Ethnography Program, National Center for Cultural Resources, National Park Service, Washington, DC.

Art Gómez is program manager, History Project Services, Intermountain Region Support Office, National Park Service, Santa Fe, New Mexico.

In late April 2001, two dozen academic scholars and historic preservation professionals convened in Baltimore, Maryland, to develop curriculum materials for a single, semester-long undergraduate course in historic preservation/cultural resource stewardship appropriate for minority colleges and universities. The purpose of the project is to assist colleges and universities that wish to offer a preservation course. On-campus courses expose students to this field and often are the first step in exploring the field as a career possibility. The group met at Morgan State University, Coppin State University, and Goucher College. Photo courtesy Toni Lee, National Park Service.